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SUBJECT: Why We Should Help the Comoros with Maritime Logistical Support

REF: A) ANTAN 186
B) 3/12 Marquardt-Beyzerov/Bittrick/Orth telcon

1. (SBU) As I write this, AU troops from Tanzania and Senegal, and perhaps also Sudan and Libya, are arriving in Moroni, on Grande Comore Island, by various means. According to the Union government, over 1,000 foreign troops are expected to come augment their own "Army of National Development" (AND) force of perhaps 400; about 400 Tanzanian and Senegalese have already arrived. While the Union government has now met repeatedly with defense counterparts of the other four nations and the AU, and reportedly developed an operational plan for the Anjouan mission, it seems clear that they cannot execute their plan without additional maritime lift capability for these soldiers and their equipment.

2. (SBU) Given this situation, twice in the past five days Comoran Foreign Minister Jaffar has phoned me to request U.S. military logistical/maritime lift support (REF A). His second request came on Tuesday, March 11, after I had informed him that no U.S. naval vessel is within reasonable steaming distance of the Comoros at this time; this time, he requested our help in locating and contracting for a commercial vessel somewhere in the sub-region that would be capable fulfilling their mission.

3. (SBU) Following reftelcon, I informed the Comoran Defense and Foreign Ministers that we were attempting to respond positively to their second request for maritime logistical support, but that to do so we would need considerable, additional, detailed information about their plan. Defense Minister Dossar told me he would provide that "precious information" on March 13 (to be transmitted separately). Additionally I told him that Defense Attache Bridges will arrive in Moroni on March 14 to assist in their planning and preparations. Both Ministers were relieved and appreciative of the prospect of this support.

-- (SBU) I greatly appreciate Washington agencies' willingness to consider positively this Comoran request for support; without our support, I fear this mission will not succeed. As we take the next steps in responding to their request, I wanted to provide the following input on why I think that it is in our national interest to provide U.S. logistics support to the Union of the Comoros and African Union to transport troops and equipment from friendly nations to and/or within the Comoros:

-- (SBU) American involvement in this action generally, and U.S. logistics participation specifically, raises considerably the possibility that, when they realize they truly are facing an overwhelming force, Colonel Bacar and his associates will throw in the towel and end this crisis without further bloodshed. With U.S.

military support in the form of an amphibious vessel, surface combatant, or even a contracted commercial vessel, its mere presence would signify a powerful commitment of the U.S. military to assist in the current crisis. This may finally convince Colonel Bacar that he has absolutely no chance to win and that his fall is imminent and inevitable.

-- (SBU) Success of the mission will help establish much-needed credibility for the African Union; failure here will have exactly the opposite effect. This would negatively impact U.S. interests in places like Darfur, where we are counting on the AU for serious support. Tanzanian Foreign Minister Membe told us as much, "As AU President, Tanzania will see to it that this organization is relevant and effective. If we cannot solve this tiny problem in Anjouan, what hope do we have in other crises in Africa?"

-- (SBU) As we struggle on a global basis to convince Muslim audiences that we are not against them in the War on Terror, here is a rare opportunity, at low cost and low risk, to respond to an invitation from a friendly Muslim democracy to cooperate militarily with a largely Muslim, multinational force intervening to restore democracy on their territory. The Arab League participated with the U.S. and others in the recent ultimatum mission to see Colonel Bacar and remains engaged in the Comoros in support of President Sambi. The Muslim world will not soon forget this positive American reply to the cry for help from one of their own.

-- (SBU) Iran's influence in the Comoros remains a wild card. Recent unconfirmed press reports indicate Comoros has "opened an Embassy" in Tehran. U.S. logistics support for Sambi will be greatly appreciated by the already pro-American President; to the detriment of Iran's influence in the Comoros. The opposite also holds true; the longer Comoros looks for friends, the further they

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may look.

-- (SBU) For several years, the Comoros has been an ally in the war on terrorism. They cooperate with DAO and RSO on counterterrorism training, information-sharing, border controls, and the Rewards for Justice program. Harun Fazul, born in the Comoros but radicalized elsewhere, is the shame of moderate Comorans. U.S. logistics support for the legitimate President Sambi, and in defense of Comoros' unity and stability, will both reinforce their motivation to cooperate on terrorism and actively prevent the country from becoming a haven for terrorist activity. Bringing Anjouan back in to the Union will help us address concerns there about drug smuggling, money laundering, shell banking, and other rule of law issues.

-- (SBU) We also will have demonstrated a sensitivity for the uncomfortable French position in the Indian Ocean, where they continue in a touchy situation given their continuing control of the fourth Comoran island of Mayotte. Giving them political cover to date has permitted their own limited support of the Union government, which otherwise they probably would have avoided. Our intervention gets them off the hook from providing something of which they are capable technically, but not politically. This in turn gives us leverage the next time we need their help elsewhere in Africa where they have capabilities that we do not.

-- (SBU) Finally, on a purely bilateral basis, this support will leave no doubt in the minds of Comorans (and their neighbors) that we truly are their friends and allies. We will have demonstrated that we are willing to step up when a democratically-elected Islamic government is challenged by a despotic thug. Clearly this is what President Sambi was looking for in his historic January meeting in Moroni with Ambassador Frazer. Even if the Comoros is one of the world's smallest countries, this will pay dividends for us far into the future.

MARQUARDT